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INFO RUCNRCC/REFUGEE COORDINATOR COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L MOSCOW 000064

SENSITIVE
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DEPARTMENT FOR PRM/ECA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/12/2020
TAGS: [PREF](#) [UNHCR](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: RUSSIAN LEGAL BARRIERS AND IO FUNDING GAPS LIMIT
PROTECTION OF DISPLACED CHILDREN

REF: A. (A) 09 STATE 49661
[1](#)B. (B) 09 MOSCOW 1836

Classified By: ACTING DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION SUSAN ELLIOTT, REASONS 1.
4(B AND D).

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Negotiating complex asylum procedures, accessing state-funded education, and obtaining psychosocial support are foremost among the challenges for refugees and internally displaced (IDP) children in Russia. International organizations face funding shortages in their attempts to improve the lives of these children, and most choose to target children in general rather than focusing on or privileging children who are forced migrants. This cable responds to a PRM monitoring request (ref A) and complements a cable assessing the protection of displaced women in Russia (ref B). End summary.

UNHCR's Haphazard Approach

[1](#)2. (C) UNHCR Moscow lacks a standard operating procedure for appointing guardians to unaccompanied minors and separated children during their asylum application process. It appoints guardians to such children on a case-by-case basis. Irina Sherbakova, Assistant Protection Officer at UNHCR Moscow, told us October 23 that there is a "legislative gap" for these children. There are insufficient Russian legal provisions for appointing legal guardians to unaccompanied minors and separated children, so this category of children cannot effectively access the country's asylum procedure. Sherbakova observes that when UNHCR pushes the authorities to follow the legal procedures in place, it may not be in the best interest of the child. For example, an Afghan child staying with an Afghan family that is not related to the child should, under the law, be sent to a Russian shelter, but then the child would be separated from his or her familiar culture. UNHCR, Sherbakova conceded, is as yet undecided about how to move forward on this issue in the context of the relatively young and underdeveloped Russian asylum system.

[1](#)3. (SBU) A Russian draft law specifies what the responsible government authorities should do for unaccompanied minors and includes provisions regarding the appointment of guardians. Sherbakova told us December 2 that in October UNHCR provided its comments to the existing draft and is looking forward to receiving an updated draft that takes its points into account.

[1](#)4. (U) In the first three quarters of 2009 UNHCR handled four cases of unaccompanied minors in the Moscow region, and one Afghan child was repatriated according to his wishes. UNHCR's Social Protection Coordinator oversees these cases. UNHCR uses the Best Interest Determination (BID) procedure to decide how to accommodate the minor. During and after an

interview with the child, a UNHCR representative fills out a standard form that details the child's history and the representative's recommendation of a durable solution for the child. A UNHCR supervisor reviews the recommendation, and then a UNHCR representative meets with the child and his or her extended family to discuss the child's future and review the final decision.

15. (SBU) Sherbakova was not familiar with the Heightened Risk Identification Tool. She reported that UNHCR is often able to identify people at risk from e-mails from people who are referring friends. In August 2009 UNHCR organized a working group on women, children, and gender as part of its implementation of Age, Gender, and Diversity Mainstreaming, but the group has only met once. Its members include representatives from the Russian Federal Migration Service, local NGOs, the Moscow City Government, UNICEF, and UNHCR. Sherbakova said this was a good network for a range of professionals involved in refugee and displaced children's issues, but she was unsure of when it would meet again.

16. (SBU) A positive development for refugee and asylum-seeking children in Moscow is their improved access to education. Although there is no federal legal protection of these children's education rights, a February 2002 decree signed jointly by the Moscow City Mayor and the Moscow Regional Governor, as well as instructions from the Moscow Department of Education, advise all city schools to accept children without requiring them to submit residence registration documents. UNHCR reports that as of June 2009 there were 65 refugee and asylum-seeking children enrolled in Russian public schools. It is easier for UNHCR to work with children in Moscow because of its established office and

resources in the capital, but there are also more refugees in Moscow than in the regions. Sherbakova did not have ideas for how UNHCR could spread the positive development in the Moscow education system to other Russian regions, and she noted that the ease of dealing with the issue depends on each region's governor.

Broader Priorities Overwhelm ICRC's Focus on Children

17. (SBU) The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in the Russian Federation does not target refugees specifically, but rather "vulnerable" people in general. A main ICRC priority in the North Caucasus is the psychosocial support of families of missing persons. ICRC has one psychosocial support delegate, whose expertise is in work for adults. According to Deputy Head of Delegation Jerome Sorg, ICRC would need additional resources to tailor the program toward psychosocial support of children who have lost parents in this devastating way. Nevertheless, ICRC supports playrooms in Chechnya and Ingushetiya that are reserved for children of IDPs and staffed with local social workers.

18. (U) As elsewhere, an ICRC priority in Russia is the promotion of international humanitarian law (IHL). Sorg told us October 22 that ICRC cooperates successfully with the Russian Ministry of Education to implement a program teaching humanitarian principles to schoolchildren. ICRC develops the curriculum, and the Ministry trains the teachers about how to convey humanitarian principles to children aged 9 to 14. The IHL education is concentrated in regions where the promotion of humanitarian principles is more critical, including the North Caucasus, Sorg noted. ICRC will transfer the entire program to the Russian Ministry of Education in mid-2010.

UNICEF Assists Vulnerable Children in Chechnya

19. (U) Similarly to ICRC, UNICEF does not have any programs specifically targeting IDP and migrant children in Russia, but UNICEF's work in the North Caucasus supports conflict-affected children. Aida Ailarova, the project

officer who oversees UNICEF's PRM-funded psychosocial services in Chechnya, told us November 2 that UNICEF conducted an awareness-raising campaign that targeted different sectors of the population: the government, school principals and teachers, parents, and children. According to Ailarova, the campaign effectively taught people to recognize and respond to psychosocial problems.

¶10. (SBU) UNICEF child protection consultant Gabrielle Akimova enlarged on Ailarova's assertion, contending that this program is critical to helping children restart their lives. First, the program offers psychosocial support in schools, so it is convenient for young people. Second, youth are involved in a peer training program, so children are not only rehabilitating themselves but also helping others. Third, over 50 percent of the program has been successfully handed over to the government, so its activities are becoming sustainable. Finally, psychosocial support for young people addresses the problem of radicalization of disaffected youth, thereby, she posited, preventing future conflict leading to new displacements.

¶11. (U) UNICEF has opened a total of 31 children's psychosocial centers in Chechnya and plans to open 19 additional centers before the end of 2009. The program's 60 local children's psychologists have received training in school counseling and trauma counseling. In late 2009 UNICEF commenced hotline services (emergency telephone counseling) in Ingushetiya and Dagestan. The organization hopes to expand its psychosocial recovery centers into those republics as well. Akimova believes the Chechnya program works well in the Caucasian cultural context, and it can be used as a model for ameliorating post-traumatic stress disorders in neighboring republics.

Positive Impact of IMC's Work in the North Caucasus

¶12. (U) The International Medical Corps (IMC), a PRM NGO partner, also implements programs in the North Caucasus that have a broader target population than just IDP and refugee children. IMC works with children in the schools to prevent and respond to gender-based violence (GBV). IMC also works with GBV survivors through public schools' staff

psychologists. IMC helps train the psychologists to handle routine cases, while IMC counselors step in to handle the most difficult cases.

¶13. (U) According to IMC's reporting, during the organization's 2008 GBV program it provided psychosocial counseling to 88 boys and 150 girls, ranging from preschool age to 18 years. Based on these consultations, IMC registered cases of GBV for 33 boys and 34 girls.

¶14. (U) Both IMC and UNICEF have designed children's programs that promote values to which the children may otherwise have limited exposure. UNICEF conducts "peace and tolerance" trainings (sponsored by USAID), while IMC teaches respect for both sexes by asking the children to perform role plays based on Chechen culture and legends. Program implementers aver that this work is valuable for long-term stability because it teaches principles of respect to the region's next generation.

¶15. (SBU) IMC's North Caucasus management hopes to improve future programs by using findings from a survey-based assessment of its community-based GBV prevention initiative in the region. The initial IMC program raised awareness of GBV, but IMC plans to shift its focus toward projects that give people practical tools to respond to GBV. One PRM-funded project is a website that IMC is developing to connect GBV survivors in the North Caucasus to activists in other Russian regions. Simon Rasin, IMC Russia Country Representative, told us October 23 that the network will aim to allow GBV survivors to overcome feelings of isolation and learn coping strategies from people living across the country.

¶16. (SBU) IMC has also started to work with local police officers, who are often the first responders to GBV. According to the IMC survey, police officers had the biggest change in attitude after IMC's GBV prevention initiative. Now, IMC plans to give the police officers tools to act. IMC is teaching the police officers about the damage GBV inflicts on a community. IMC's Rasin emphasized to us the need to deliver IMC's message in the appropriate religious and cultural context: "We cannot do social engineering." IMC thus finds it necessary to frame women's and girls' liberation as gender equity rather than as gender equality. Another aspect of IMC's work with first responders is training the officers about legal issues associated with GBV. In collaboration with UNHCR, IMC teaches the police how to apply the existing Russian criminal code to GBV-related cases.

¶17. (SBU) Funding limitations prevent IMC from building "centers of excellence," Rasin's preferred long-term solution to the region's dearth of medical professionals with specialized training in GBV issues. Rasin observed that at present there are few incentives for trained medical workers to stay in Chechnya, where the health care system is weak and access to proper equipment limited. Similar to universities, "centers of excellence" would be permanent facilities that would serve as a hub of knowledge, facilitating the growth of local capacity even after IMC leaves the region.

Comment

¶18. (C) UNHCR needs to establish a standard method to handle unaccompanied minors. This category of children is especially vulnerable due to Russian legislative gaps on top of the distress associated with separation from parents. Up to now UNHCR's case-by-case handling of children has worked effectively, but in the event of a crisis, such as new or exacerbated conflagration in Afghanistan or Iran, that results in a heavier influx of cases of unaccompanied minors, UNHCR is unprepared to handle the children efficiently and effectively.

¶19. (SBU) With regard to the IMC and UNICEF North Caucasus programs, although they both provide psychosocial support, the organizations have avoided duplication if only because the problems to be addressed are so massive. As long as the organizations remain in communication, they work as force multipliers to ameliorate the pain of the region's long-suffering children.
Rubin